66,491 Pounds of Carbon
The price we pay to develop a broader world view

I’ll spare you the calculation, but suffice it to say that LEADNY Class 16 Fellows put about 67,000 pounds of CO2 into the atmosphere during our recent trip to the Philippines and Vietnam. And that’s just our share of the airline emissions getting from our homes in Upstate New York to SE Asia and back. If you tack on the ground transportation for both here and there, we could be approaching the 100,000 pound mark.

Given that one of the major topics explored during this trip was climate change and its impact on food security in developing countries, it seems appropriate to share our own carbon emissions in getting there. You might even wonder, how could we legitimize a trip that contributes — through our substantial carbon emissions — to one of the very problems we hope to address? Perhaps it’s the price we have to pay to get to a longer-lasting solution.

In his book *A New Psychology for Sustainability Leadership: The hidden power of ecological worldviews* (2015) author Steve Schein suggests that the leaders of the most sustainable companies and organizations on the planet share one thing in common: they all hold what he calls an “ecological world view”. In a nutshell, his research suggested that these leaders see themselves (and the companies or organizations they lead) as part of a larger, global, interdependent ecological system. They did not view the impact of their operations as being limited to a specific industry sector, geographical location, political boundary, etc. Like many native cultures, they saw their presence as taking place in — and being part of — a larger ecosystem, not as being master over it.

The question is, just how did these “sustainability leaders” develop that ecological world view? Dr. Schein’s answer: nearly all of them had at least one significant international life experience. We’re not talking vacations to exotic places and sandy beaches. He is referring to crucible experiences, like intensive study travel to developing countries, to learn about the impact of their actions on people all around the world. Sound familiar? That’s exactly what we do on LEAD New York study trips. We didn’t travel to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam to learn exactly how Vietnamese farmers grow rice so that we could do the same — because I don’t see us growing a lot of rice in New York any time soon. We did travel there to learn how rising sea levels, reduced fresh water flow from upstream industrial development, and saltwater intrusion are all affecting this breadbasket’s ability to feed one of the most densely populated regions on earth. And we considered how our actions (e.g. energy consumption, consumerism, and trade) might be contributing to those problems. And we learned so much more.

I have often used the analogy that if you want to be an airline pilot, eventually you have to fly a plane. You can learn a lot about flying a plane by reading books, taking classes, and even spending time in a simulator. But if you want your pilot’s license, eventually you are going to have to put in the hours behind the stick in the cockpit. And so it is if we want to develop leaders that “think globally, and act locally”. We can learn a lot about the world from reading books, taking classes, listening to speakers, and so on. But if you really want to understand the world, eventually you will have to get out in it. I don’t know a lot of “worldly leaders” with global perspectives that haven’t seen a good chunk of the world.

But don’t take it from me, take it from that wisest of American authors, Mark Twain:

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”

I couldn’t agree more, and that is why travel is an important part of our curriculum. It challenges pre-conceived notions. It shatters misperceptions. It opens minds. It broadens perspectives. It encourages critical thinking. It builds richer, ecological world views. *It helps develop better leaders.* That is what we are about, and as the preceding article suggests, our Fellows seem to have learned the lesson.